

Preserving Our Heritage

By RICHARD BARDOLPH*

The flattering invitation to speak to this session was accompanied by the suggestion that I concentrate my remarks on the preservation of our heritage, a theme with which I disquieted UNC-G's class of 1980 at its commencement exercise last May. I accept the assignment for today with enthusiasm (and a little trepidation), for I believe with all my heart that we are dealing with something that is terribly important—and I mean “terribly” in its most literal sense.

I am increasingly persuaded that I can discern two divergent trends with respect to “historical consciousness” in the public mind. One of them I find full of menace and foreboding. It seems to proceed from the assumption that there is no yesterday and that there will be no tomorrow: that there is only a Now, a sterile and endless Present, answerable only to itself. I refer of course to the growing rejection of heritage, a refusal to grant the awesome immediacy of history, an imperious self-absorption of the moment. And it is not just a negative thing; it is an affirmation. It flows, I think, from the newly ascendant habit of looking upon the historical past as if it were some sort of implacable iron madonna who crushes and smothers us in her gothic embrace. It is against this dangerous delusion that, especially, I would do battle today.

The other, and contrary, trend is more encouraging, though not encouraging enough to overcome or to contain the menace inherent in the first. I allude to the surprisingly resurgent public appetite for history, stimulated, I think, in part by the recent bicentennial, and in part by the humiliations, the discouragements, the distempers of the last twenty or thirty years, and by the hunger that they create for the solace that a good wallow in nostalgia affords: a kind of retreat into the womb of time; a means of fighting down our doubts and apprehensions by singing and whistling in the gathering gloom. Or, to change the figure, a recourse to folk-boasting and pride in our past, a heavily edited past, from which we select for celebration the elements that lift our spirits (even if it is necessary to touch them up a bit with invention), and from which we sponge away inconvenient reminders of past failures and shames. It is after all easier to erase or rewrite portions of the past than it is to blot out misfortunes that so palpably trouble us now! It is easier to carpenter up a historical stage set than to confront current realities.

To take first the second of these seemingly contrary predispositions, we need only look about us to see it manifested. A recent issue of *Harper's* magazine neat-

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ly summarizes the phenomenon.¹ There are now more than 3,000 historical societies in America—concentrated in our smaller counties and cities, to be sure—but exceeding by about 100 percent the number in existence only thirty years ago. In the past quarter of a century the only popular magazine that paid its way without advertising revenue was *American Heritage*; the hard-cover book trade in the past three decades has been dominated not by novels but by histories: books by Arnold Toynbee, and Barbara Tuchman, and Bruce Catton, and Jim Bishop, and Theodore White, and David Halberstam, and Alex Haley, all of which competed, incidentally, with such social/historical TV soap operas as the *Forsyte Saga* and *Upstairs, Downstairs*. The *Harper's* article tells us that 60 percent of the Harvard class of 1968 were a decade after graduation restoring old houses. It reminds us also that the bicentennial was “entirely consumed by history” (some of it tasteless and souvenir-ish, but some of it grandly moving, like the parade of old-fashioned sailing ships); but the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia was almost wholly dedicated to machinery and industrial America's current productions. Meanwhile, everybody these days is looking up his ancestors and rejoicing in his ethnic antecedents.

Why then do I mourn? It is, alas, because the lively vogue of collecting and preserving reminders and relics of the past, and their tasteful exhibition in museums and well-edited quarterlies are not enough to halt, much less to reverse, that other melancholy trend to which I have alluded. Indeed, in my darker moments the ascendant buffery (by the way, not so long ago a “buff” was only one who was crazy about going to fires; but now the dictionary admits history buffs); I say, in my darker moments the ascendant buffery in some ways even deepens my depression, because it has, I fear, the tendency to exacerbate the erosions and attritions that compromise the health of history as a popular preoccupation. For is it not true that “popular versus serious history” also translates into “popular versus unpopular history”?

Let me illustrate some facets of my meaning by sharing with you what a history professor keeps hearing from students, from friends (real and pretended), from neighbors, fellow passengers on the bus and the airplane, from dinner partners he gets stuck with at table, from cocktail and golf-course acquaintances—in fact sooner or later from nearly everybody who, for one reason or another, feels obliged to make small talk. First, there is that master of congeniality who, after you have told him that you have been in the business for thirty years, looks you in the eye and confides, “History, eh? Always hated it in school; always avoided it when I could. Still do. All those dates and facts. Never could see much use in it.” What he means, of course, is that the extremely limited number (by his own admission) of historians he has read or heard have failed to get through to him; and one can only surmise whether it was his own or *their* obtuseness that threw up the barrier. You just can't “hate” history; you can “hate” historians or such historical writing or lecturing as you may have encountered; but not *history*. You can't “hate” everything that has ever been said and done and thought before this moment, unless, of course, you are very, very seriously deranged. Indeed, the more absurd or depraved or dull the total human experience until now, the more interesting a

¹ John Lukacs, “Obsolete Historians,” *Harper's*, 261 (November, 1980), 80-84.

knowledge of it can be, if only to enable you to contrast the sorry record of mankind with your own wisdom and moral superiority and towering intelligence! It would be just as absurd, for it is precisely the same thing, to wish to be without *any* memory of anything in one's own personal life up to the very moment that one is expressing this demented sentiment.

Then there is that other fellow, sometimes even harder to take than the one we have just left, who works the other side of the street. "History, eh? My great love in high school and college. Always was; still is. Just couldn't wait until we got to the Civil War. Still can't get enough of the Civil War." That one gets your hopes up for just a fleeting moment, only to pulverize you with proofs that he is just another souvenir hunter, another collector of relics and myths, who knows virtually no history to speak of, and least of all about the Civil War, even if you credit him with a large inventory of data and anecdotes, most of which are skewed or flat-out wrong, or, worst of all, pathetically unimportant to the majestic tides of history. This one is happiest when he is pacing off the length and breadth of a battlefield, and in very heaven when he turns up a belt buckle or minié ball. Now it is, of course, not his *hobby* that I regret; on the contrary, I wish him joy of it; I have as much pleasure when I join him as he does, and for the very same reasons. What grieves me is that *that* is history enough for him, and it proves in the end to be the obstacle that prevents him from getting into more important history. We leave him blissfully wandering down the lanes of John D. Rockefeller's Williamsburg, Virginia, watching a costumed artisan dipping candles or hammering out pewter cups. We sigh as we hear him observe to a fellow tourist (who is nervously looking at his electronic computerized wristwatch lest he miss his plane) how much more history he learns in this *authentic atmosphere*, than he did in some of those lectures in the university, or some of those dry books in its library.

Then there is the genealogy buff, tracking down his ancestors. No objection here either; I enjoy it myself. But unless one brings to that enterprise a heaping measure of genial skepticism, and unless one looks sharply about him as he threads his way through those pleached alleys to observe more than mere patterns of descent, and unless he has a lively appreciation of the vastly more fateful stream of history than the remarkably uniform ways of begetting, one may be denying himself access to the quest of historical meaning under the delusion that he is already there. One is tempted to add that the genealogy fan is all too often oblivious to the hazards that dog his enterprise. He is all too apt, in his filiopietistic zeal, to presume unbroken lines of legitimate descent through thirty-five generations back to William the Conqueror (forgetting, incidentally, that that lusty Norman himself was known as William the Bastard). Or, more modestly, claiming descent from a signer of the Declaration of Independence, he is apt to forget that six generations separate us from those days, which means that one's direct ancestors reaching back to that date would typically number 128, of which the Signer is only *one*. That is, if you are a sixth-generation direct descendant of Button Gwinnett, you are one part Gwinnett and 127 parts other people, and those are awfully long odds. Again, if the climber of family trees finds pleasure and instruction in tracing back those presumed ancestors, it may prove a gateway into more substantial history; but it may also be a distraction that bars one's way. But, in and of itself, it is not going to be a whole lot of history.

Two other categories have over the years banged away at me with their drum-fire. For one, there is the dealer in small change who asks you who the fellow was who strangled those two women in Sampson County in 1888. And when you can't tell him, he counters with, "but you teach history over at the University, don't you?" But even he is more bearable than that other infatuated amateur who is privy not only to the causes of the fall of Rome (having, perhaps, heard two sermons on the point) but who knows just what "history teaches" about the perils of federal deficits, and fluoridation, and busing, and who knows just what made this country great in the old days, and how all those liberals and bureaucrats are ruining it now. And if you don't agree with his prescriptions he writes you off as an overeducated fraud or a bigot or both.

Well, what then *can* history teach us, and what is its proper study? The citizen who takes his responsibilities seriously is buffeted by conflicting counsels on the point, and it is easy to sympathize with his confusions. There is, for one, that moss-grown adage, "History always repeats itself," which, even if we overlook the hyperbolic "always," is surely the most often quoted piece of folklore about history, and no less surely the most uninformative. For what does it say except that, for the most part, the same sort of things keep happening in much the same way? Then there is that other celebrated one-liner, "The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history." False, of course. That one should read, "One of the things we learn from history is that most men choose to learn nothing from history." And the remedy for that is not less, but more and deeper historical reading and study.

A third famous opinion, always cited in discussions of the uses of history (usually by scholars who want to refute it), is Henry Ford's blunt pronouncement: "History is bunk." He ought to know. For a man who perhaps did more than any other to destroy the old America, and then purged his grief by assembling a quaint little museum-replica of it at Greenfield, Michigan, he is hardly a surprise. From a man who published his nasty little anti-Semitic weekly *Dearborn Independent* and who lent his commanding authority to one of the most vicious historical hoaxes of any age, the spurious "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," one is hardly startled to hear that history is bunk.

And there is, of course, that other judgment, beloved of scholars, the famous proverb of George Santayana: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That must be one of the wisest things that has ever been said about the writing and reading of history. And in his sense the really essential history may be supported and illuminated by, but must not be equated with, museums and markers, pageants and reenactments, souvenirs and relics, or the preservation of fine old houses and historic structures. I beg you not to misunderstand me. Those things are important, too, *very* important. They enrich our lives; they refine and ennoble our sensibilities; they surround us with comforting and challenging reminders that call us back to our better selves; they salvage treasures that would otherwise be lost; they help us to keep in sacred remembrance the ashes of our fathers and mothers and the temples of our gods. Let them increase from more to more!

(Forgive me if in what follows I adapt for my present purpose some observations I shared a few months ago with another audience.) Around the globe the na-

tions taunt each other in precarious equipoise, a balance of terror. And in our own distracted land, once the Happy Young Republic whom all the world envied, our exuberant youth has given place to careworn middle age. When sleep eludes us in the midnight watches we are haunted by fears that we may have squandered both our material and moral patrimony. Our pecuniary values dwindle; moth and rust corrupt our treasure; thieves break through and steal. Willing hands are idle; our soil is poisoned, our air polluted, our water befouled; the sense of fair value has atrophied, the instinct of workmanship gone slack; our tastes are infantilized, our humor brutalized, our morality compromised, our spirits dejected, our language debased.

Perhaps nothing is more fascinating to students of the rise and fall of civilizations than the circumstance that, in Winston Churchill's phrase, so many owe so much to so few. Providence, it would seem, has elected to entrust the better aspirations of a people to a saving remnant who, while their fellows sleep or carouse or pursue their petty purposes, keep anxious vigil on the walls, alert, ready, when danger impends, to sound the trumpet and summon the brave. And I am not speaking here of the Pentagon's sentries on the ramparts *they* watch; I speak of the heroes of the spirit and the mind, the saints and seers, the poets, the artists, the probing scholars and scientists, in short, the guardians of the sacred traditions to whose keeping a people's well-being is so largely confided, and who keep under steady criticism the ideals and beliefs which point us to the answers to the great questions of good and evil, of life and death.

Can anyone doubt that our most dangerous foes now are in our own household, corrupting the spirit and setting at naught the counsels of our wisest and best? And are not the corruptors more powerfully armed than ever in the history of human susceptibility? They have in their arsenal dreadfully effective engines of persuasion, reinforced by the anesthetic soothings of puerile amusements, multiplying creature comforts and seductive distractions that entrap the hearts and minds of deluded and infatuated millions whose intellectual and moral defenselessness renders them easy prey. Try, I dare you, to tell *them* what every receptive heir of our great classical antecedents knows in his heart: that it is far, far better to be the victim of injustice than to be its accomplice; try to tell *them* what all know who drink at the healing streams of the Judeo-Christian tradition, that it is in giving that we receive, that it is in losing ourselves that we are found, that it is in dying that we are made alive. Try to tell *them* that if one has three loaves of bread he should give one to his hungry neighbor and sell another to buy a hyacinth for his soul.

But not only is our glorious heritage under withering attack; the very *principle* of heritage itself is in mortal jeopardy. The steady repudiation of our heritage is rooted, one senses, in a deeper and broader rebellion against the very idea of authority itself—that inordinate assertion of self whose tragic story began in Eden—a revolt which in *our* time invokes the plausible slogans of "human dignity," the "free individual," against the transcendent in religion, against ancient and tested values in education, against cherished political and constitutional precepts and practice, against the venerable rules that have kept social relations and private and public virtue in a reasonably stable frame since our culture's infancy.

I would be the last to dispute that the shared tradition upon which our society rests is flawed and in desperate need of amendment, that an undisciplined technology and a misapplied and perverted science have brought us to the age of the dehumanized, depersonalized, diminished man.

But shall we find the remedy in cynicism and the rejection of meaning? In the upraised clenched fist and the downcast clenched mind? In their arrogant disdain for the past and for the stored wisdom of the ages, in their angry repudiation of the splendid, if flawed, tradition in which American civilization was cradled; in their shrill demand for relevance (which they confuse with mere contemporaneity); in their substitution of a situation ethic (which is like tennis without a net) for the ineffable and the transcendent, they have mounted a new barbarian invasion, which, if it is not hurled back, can end only with the toppling of our culture from its historic base, cutting it off from the soil in which it germinated, and from the life-giving elements that have sustained it for centuries.

It is as if men should, in one apocalyptic holocaust, wipe out all past human achievement, and begin all over again the labor of millennia, to reinvent the wheel and the lever, and rediscover fire and writing and microbes and the differential calculus, and all the rest, so that we can make a fresh start uninhibited by what they are pleased to call superstition and credulity, unhampered by any constraint upon mankind's right to "do his own thing" in proud defiance of the past.

Some have likened this revolt against our cultural heritage to the girdling of a tree. The advancing American pioneer, you will remember, struggling to subdue the forest, often chose to avoid the backbreaking toil of felling the tough, green trees with his axe, by *girdling* and then burning off the standing dead timber. He had only to cut an inch-deep incision around the trunk, close to the earth, for it is immediately under the bark that the stored aliments flow upward. The moment the cut was made the tree was doomed beyond recall, for the intricate mechanism by which the lofty oak manufactured and distributed its nourishment through all its vast anatomy had been forever interrupted, no matter if two or three hundred years had gone into its maturing.

After the girdling, life went on, to be sure, for a season, and the tree lost little of its outward vigor, for the food had earlier been stored in sufficient quantity to complete the year's cycle of life and growth. In November the leaves drifted to the ground and the lofty monarch of the forest faced confidently into the winter apparently to be revived when the buds should swell once more in the spring.

But all is not well with that tree. The hand of man has shut off the fountain which nature had quickened. And when the spring rains come, and the sun warms the earth, and the elements under the forest floor offer themselves again to the roots that seek them out, this tree will not respond to the ancient impulses that animated it in the past. It has been forever separated from the nourishment that first warmed it into life so long ago, and then sustained it through its youth, and on into the days of its greatness.

The long experience of our forebears pleads with its sons and daughters to hold fast to all that has been best in our civilization's heritage: all those treasured values, social usages, and institutional forms, and all those triumphs of the human mind and spirit in which we in the scholarly community have so deeply believed, and which we have tried to transmit, but which, for all our eagerness, we

have so imperfectly exemplified, so imperfectly expressed. All good and thoughtful men and women plead for a return to those great, humane preoccupations, the anxious contemplation of man's deeper nature, his deeper needs, and the meaning of his days.

The pages of history provide us with a lifetime of reading and reflection upon what the wisest and best of all ages have thought and said: those heroes of our cultural tradition who professed, and those who now still profess, especially through the liberal arts, and most of all in the study of history, unashamed allegiance to that central theme of the humanities: the uniqueness of humankind: of Man, the only inhabitant of our planet with the capacity for thinking his way out of dilemmas, the only organism capable of rapture and despair, of distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil, lest the whole human enterprise come to wreck by surrendering the conception of man as created in the image of God to the contemplation of man as mechanism, a little lower than the devils, the self-betrayed victim of an amoral technology he cannot control, and a sterile skepticism that can neither inspire him to noble living nor comfort his fears of death. For if there is none to sound the trumpet, who will go into the battle?

Let us not deflect our gaze from our civilization's central and continuing themes: our shared values, our enduring purposes, our painstakingly wrought means for realizing them, the accumulated knowledge and wisdom and faith that have guided and sustained us. These are what matter most. When have we needed them more?